

Wrestling with *The Sunflower*

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I looked into your eyes...that reflected all the murdered people... And yet, those eyes are not filled with hatred; they remain warm and tolerant and full of sympathy for the misery of others.

Albert Speer, former high-ranking Nazi who repented at the Nuremberg trials, upon meeting Simon Wiesenthal

I once spoke to a writer who told me the best literature, such as the Old Testament stories, contained great literary truths. Like a diamond they sparkle with many facets, he said, and permit many valid viewing perspectives. Some of these stories, I believe, can lead us to moral truths, which can only be grasped by grappling.

Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower* provides us with such an example through a moving personal narrative and extensive commentary by others which compel our ethical consideration. I will summarize Wiesenthal's story and the ensuing symposium, highlight some important aspects of both, and discuss the implied road ahead.

The author begins his account by describing the hardships of the Lemberg concentration camp and his strong response to seeing sunflowers grow above the graves of a military cemetery. While part of the camp's labor crew working at a hospital, a nurse takes him to hear a confession of cruelty toward Jews from a dying young Nazi, Karl, who begs for forgiveness from Wiesenthal. Wiesenthal struggles with ambivalence about complying with this request, but eventually departs in silence, refusing to provide what the soldier wanted, even as he is unsure if he made the right decision.

After his liberation, still troubled by his behavior with the Nazi, Wiesenthal visits Karl's mother. He declines to tell her about her son's transgressions and again questions whether he should have provided forgiveness. Wiesenthal ends the story by asking the reader "What would you have done?"

The rest of the book, in what Wiesenthal calls “The Symposium,” the author includes responses from a wide variety of people, including religious and political leaders, writers, professors, and Holocaust and other genocide survivors. They offer differing interpretations and opinions about Wiesenthal’s story and the broader concerns it raises.

The central issue in The Symposium is the topic of forgiveness. Some writers agree with the author’s silence and his refusal to offer forgiveness, however, they express a number of different views. For example, Sven Alkalaj, Jewish Ambassador to the US from Bosnia and Herzegovina, concurs with Wiesenthal, claiming that only victims can forgive, but believes forgetting is worse than forgiving. A Christian professor of religion, Eva Fleischner, justifies Wiesenthal’s action citing the perpetrator’s lack of opportunity for restitution. Andre Stein, professor of Human Communications, emphasizes non-forgiveness and the resulting guilty conscience for the aggressors. He sees this as a public deterrent for future atrocities and as a way of “healing and honoring” the victims’ pain and mourning.

The Symposium also gives voice to those who disagree with Wiesenthal’s actions. Christopher Hollis, British journalist and author, believes we are always obliged to forgive because of the mandate stated by Jesus at the Crucifixion. A nun of Native American descent, Jose Hobday, affirms this belief and adds we should do this for the mutual benefit of perpetrator and victim. Similarly, the Dalai Lama espouses unconditional forgiveness, but cautions against forgetting, to forestall recurrent crimes.

Compassion, related to forgiveness, occurs several times in Wiesenthal’s account. He shows this trait by listening and touching Karl, swatting away a fly bothering him, and refraining from disclosing the truth to his mother. With some of these acts he feels ambivalent and, regarding the mother, wonders, “Perhaps it was a mistake not to have told her the truth. Perhaps her tears might help to wash away some of the misery of the world.” Some contributors praise Wiesenthal’s humane acts while others object to them, asserting that individuals, like Karl, deserve a

guilty conscience and certain people, such as the mother, need to receive hard truths whose consequences may help prevent other brutalities.

Bonny Fetterman, co-editor of *The Symposium*, raises the idea that reconciliation with those who have committed barbaric acts involves both forgiveness and compassion, but requires a more complex effort and results in a stronger bond. She writes in the book's preface, "...when the killing was stopped, how can a people make peace with another who moments before were their mortal enemies? ...How can victims come to peace with their past, and hold on to their own humanity and morals in the process?"

To help us address these questions, contributors articulate a spectrum of responses. John Pawlikowski, Catholic Priest and professor, posits that reconciliation requires a number of stages, "repentance, contrition, acceptance of responsibility, healing, and finally reunion." Sven Alkalaj stresses "punishment and some measure of justice" as necessary for peaceful relations. At the opposite polarity, Desmond Tutu warns, "...if we look only to retributive justice, then we could just as well close up shop ... without forgiveness, there is no future."

Susannah Heschel, professor of Jewish Studies, doubts the plausibility of reconciliation, at least in the case of the Shoah, and speculates whether a different paradigm might be preferable. She quotes her father, Rabbi Abraham Heschel, saying "the blood of the innocent cries forever," and she comments "Should that blood cease to cry, humanity would cease to be."

As an alternative to reconciliation, she proposes seeking a way that victims and their descendants can live without malice and maintain their humanity when they think of the savagery committed against them. For living Nazis and their heirs, they should "hear the cry of Jewish blood, and thereby preserve their own humanity."

Regardless of how we see reconciliation, Wiesenthal inspires us toward a brighter future with the hopeful symbol of the sunflower. He first notices it as his workgroup passes a military cemetery and observes this flower growing above each grave. Through these flowers he imagines the dead receiving light and

messages from the living, contrasting the probable dire condition of his own mass grave, where there would be no sunflowers. Sunflowers become a recurrent and meaningful symbol throughout the story. They represent the respect and dignity humanity needs to extend to all people in order to create a more loving and just world.

This symbol points us toward a more harmonious society, an idea that the contributors in *The Symposium* would agree with even if they disagree about how to achieve that goal.

Wiesenthal suggests an approach to help overcome those disagreements, by relating a conversation he had with Bolek, a Catholic seminary student. After his confusing experience with Karl, Wiesenthal seeks out Bolek's opinion. The men enter into a dialogue, listening to each other, exchanging ideas, and moderating their views about the correctness of Wiesenthal's decision. When we consider this signal, it becomes apparent that Wiesenthal wants us to engage in private reflection and civil conversations with diverse perspectives, where we can learn from each other.

The Sunflower shines a light on this path forward by challenging us to wrestle with perplexing issues in order to gain clarity. The book makes a valuable contribution to this endeavor, serving as a viable base from which to launch difficult ethical explorations.